

It was scary, but Elizabeth breaks out of sex-kitten roles

By **Susan King, Special to the Tribune.** Susan King is a writer for the Los Angeles Times, a Tribune newspaper

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

NOVEMBER 1, 2001 | HOLLYWOOD

Making her first true horror film was a "fun but scary experience," said actress Shannon Elizabeth, who came to fame two years ago as the supersexy foreign exchange student Nadia in "American Pie."

While shooting "Thirteen Ghosts," a remake of the kitschy 1960 William Castle horror film by the same name, Elizabeth, 28, stayed at an apartment hotel.

"We were shooting in Canada," she recalled. "I was by myself. Every time I would come home I would get scared. We had these full-length mirrored closets in every room. I would go in and I would grab (the closet door) and open it really fast. I was convinced there was going to be people in there. There was a back room that was a storage area room and I would check it every time I came home because I was just convinced somebody was going to be hiding in there. I got very paranoid."

Warner Bros.' "Thirteen Ghosts," which opened last week, is a change of pace for Elizabeth, who has been eager to break out of her sex-kitten comedic image from both "American Pie" movies, as well as "Scary Movie" (a horror movie spoof) and "Tomcats."

Fighting typecast

"At first I fought not to do comedies, but not to always be the pretty girl," Elizabeth said during a recent interview. "Now I think I am fighting not to be the pretty girl and not to do comedies." Since she dyed her long hair blond and donned big glasses for her role as a thief in the recent comedy "Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back," people seem eager to give her a chance to do more diverse parts, she said.

"I was really lucky with 'Thirteen Ghosts,'" said the tall, whippet-slender former model. "I didn't have to fight for it. I just went in and met with producer Joel Silver. He felt that I was right for that."

In "Thirteen Ghosts," Elizabeth plays Kathy, the college-age daughter of a poor widower (Tony Shalhoub) who inherits a fabulous glass house from his rich uncle. The only problem is that the house comes with 13 ghosts, which can be seen only with special glasses. Also hidden inside the house is a fortune.

In the film, Kathy has taken on the role of surrogate mother to her little brother.

"She has kind of had to pick up the pieces when her mom died," said Steve Beck, a commercial director who makes his feature film debut with "Thirteen Ghosts." "She feels a bit that she has lost her youth. She is

trying to just fill a vacuum left by a death in her family. When they inherit this house, she feels that they have made it."

Born to modeling

Elizabeth fell into her modeling and acting career. An only child who grew up in Waco, Texas, she became a member of the fashion board of a Dillards department store. She got her first taste of show business when a local rock band shot its video in Waco.

"The producer and director were from New York," she recalled. "There was something in the paper about casting extras. I made it in and the producer and I got to be friends. He started to talk to me about modeling. I didn't think I was pretty. I didn't think I could smile. They talked to my parents about it. The producer said if we wanted to come to New York he would set me up with a photographer. Over Christmas break we ended up doing that. I ended up getting a contract with an agency in New York. I went through that in the hopes of it leading me to acting."

Elizabeth's modeling career lasted about six years. "I did a little bit of everything," she said. "I was never extremely successful at it. So the stuff I did the most was probably catalog work. I did some commercials. I never made a ton (of money), but I made enough to get by."

Eventually, she came to Los Angeles. "When I came out here, my agency in Texas asked me to see some agencies here," she said. "I was just terrified of L.A. I had the idea in my head it was so big and my parents kept saying, 'Your car is going to get stripped.' I did some shoots and I booked a commercial. I extended my stay to the point I never left."

Prepping with classes

Elizabeth took acting classes for a year before she started going to auditions. "I wanted to make sure that I felt I was ready," she said. "Even then I wasn't so sure that I could just go on auditions. When I get a film, I work with a coach. It really builds up my confidence to know I have done my homework."

She met her fiancé, Joseph D. Reitman, in an acting class. "He coaches a lot, too, because he is such a good actor," she said. "He and I are constantly going over things. He specializes in comedy -- he taught me timing."

The couple are animal lovers; they have five rescued dogs. They also have started an animal rescue organization, Animal Avengers. The dogs "are my kids," Elizabeth said. "When I worry about things going on in the world and keeping me safe and my fiancé safe, I worry about keeping my animals safe. I have been trying to find gas masks for dogs. I have a vet friend who said that somebody in his office got some."

Welcome to the Web

Thanks to her film roles and her Playboy pictorial two years ago, Elizabeth has become one of the hottest attractions on the Internet. She has her own site, www.shannonelizabeth.com, and numerous fan sites are devoted to the actress.

"We have gotten to be pretty good friends with a couple of guys who did original sites on me because Joe has always been huge on monitoring the Internet," she said. One fan from Atlanta has visited the couple in L.A.

"There is another guy who moved out here from Boston and he's a computer genius," she said. "He's working for us now doing stuff for our site. I have a chat page on my site now, and it's usually the same people there. I have been trying to go on once a week. I know they are all in there hanging out and waiting."

Copyright © 2021, Chicago Tribune